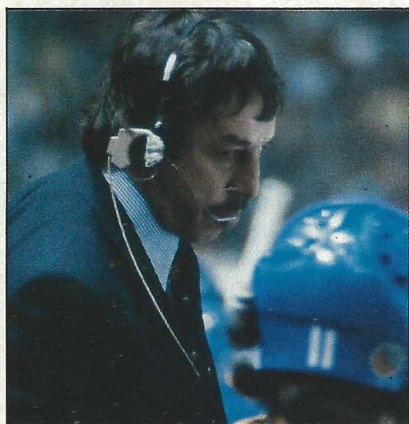


"...the Sabres have been effusive in their praise of the Buffalo coaching staff and its methods. In this case, the system may be the solution."

WAVE OF THE FUTURE



By Michael Farber
Montreal Gazette

AS WE JOIN OUR HERO Ralph A. Strumpf, he is fiddling with the dial on his short wave radio.

We can score if we attack the left wing, a voice crackles over the air.

"Wow," thinks Mr. Strumpf, "am I eavesdropping on some Republican election strategy?"

We should consider using the boards to a greater degree, the radio voice blurts.

"What is this," Strumpf wonders, "a college admissions panel deciding on the qualifications of an applicant?"

We should send fresh killers out whenever we can, the voice says.

"Now hold on," our hero cries, "am I listening to an incipient gangland murder?"

No, no and no. Ralph A. Strumpf happens to have tuned into a Buffalo Sabres hockey game, as described by coaches Roger Neilson and Jimmy Roberts. Neilson, you see, relays information from the press box to Roberts on the bench, via radio, over the course of every Sabres' game.

They may provide great analysis and no commercials, but they're a little weak on play-by-play.

"I understand the chances of our messages being intercepted are a million-to-one," says Roberts, the assistant coach. "And besides, how much can anybody crack our secrets by hearing us say 'do you see the blonde in the fourth row?'"

Having performed disappointingly since they reached the Stanley Cup final in 1975, the Sabres this year have seemed revitalized under the regime of general manager/head coach Scott Bowman.

Though often a coach insists that, "It's not me, the players are doing it," and the players in turn insist that, "It's not him, we're the one's who are doing it," the Sabres have been effusive in their praise of the Buffalo coaching staff and its methods. In this case, the system may be the solution.

Bowman is a traditional, hard-nosed coach and Roberts was a traditional, hard-nosed player. Completing the trio is associate coach Roger Neilson, who has introduced a bit of *Star Trek* into the NHL.

Neilson, a successful coach at both

the junior and minor league levels, came to the Toronto Maple Leafs three years ago loaded with new ideas and new equipment—including a video tape machine, which he spent hours upon hours viewing. Leafs' owner Harold Ballard was excited by the innovations at first, but the relationship soured and Neilson took off for Buffalo last summer.

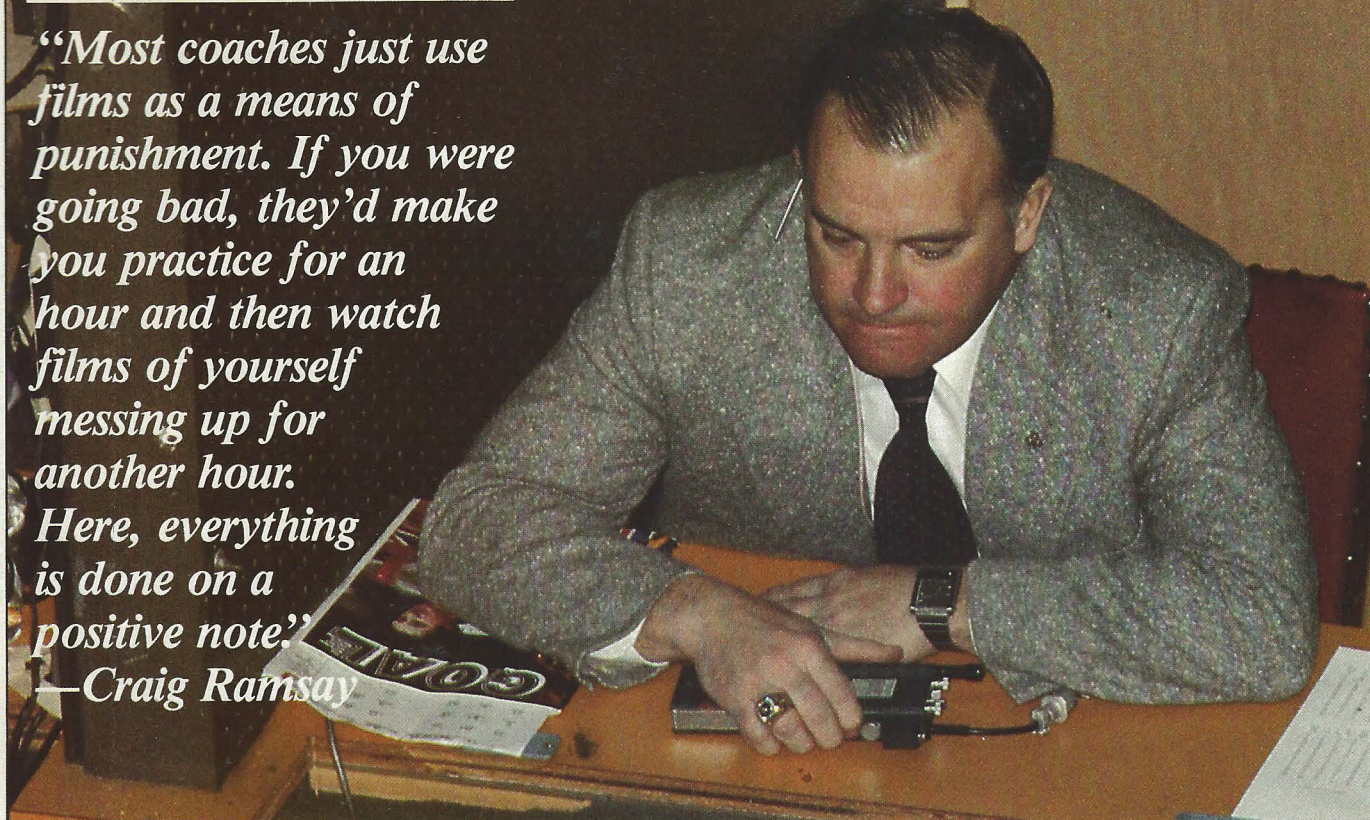
Around the NHL, tape may be what players put on their sticks, but not to Neilson, a.k.a. Captain Video, and his aide Al Dunford, a.k.a. Lieutenant Video.

"Ever since I was coaching in juniors, I've been using video tapes of games to let the players know what happened and show them some things that might help," Neilson says. "As you advance in hockey, the equipment at your disposal becomes more sophisticated.

"For years, professional football has been doing what we are now doing, but football has a 16-game season and many people thought it impractical to utilize for an 80-game

Above: Jim Roberts, left, has observations relayed to him from Roger Neilson, who is studying the action from the press box.

"Most coaches just use films as a means of punishment. If you were going bad, they'd make you practice for an hour and then watch films of yourself messing up for another hour. Here, everything is done on a positive note."
—Craig Ramsay



Occasionally Scotty Bowman will switch places with Neilson and view the game from the Sabres pressbox, walkie-talkie in hand.

hockey season. People were leery of it at first, just like they're leery of anything new, but I think they're beginning to see its value.

"The only thing new, really, is that we tape games on the road. We bring our own equipment with us. Most teams take films at home, but we feel road games are more important because those are the games in which you usually have more trouble. Road tapes give us a better look at ourselves."

The Buffalo coaches also get a better look than most because they're at something of a crossroads of hockey. Buffalo television viewers get Sabres games, naturally, but they also can pick up New York Rangers and Islanders road games, the Maple Leafs on Wednesday and the Hockey Night in Canada telecast on Saturday—which includes scoring plays from other games around the league.

Neilson and Dunford may edit 2½ hours of tape down to five minutes, culling clips to show how an opponent kills penalties, attacks on the power play, or even how a given player likes to cross the blue line.

Their product is shown prior to the game on an oversized screen (like the

one in your neighborhood watering hole) upstairs in the Sabre locker room, and Bowman follows with the game plan for the evening.

That's for games. For practices, the Sabres turn the cameras on themselves. If, for instance, the team is having trouble in four-on-four skating situations, Neilson and Dunford may prepare a tape which illustrates that aspect of the game. If a particular Sabre is in a slump, they may put together a tape of all of his good plays to help boost his confidence.

"You can't believe how effective their use of film is," says forward Craig Ramsay. "Most coaches just use films as a means of punishment. If you were going bad, they'd make you practice for an hour and watch films of yourself messing up for another hour. All the while, the coach would be screaming, 'Don't ever do that again.' Here, everything is done on a positive note."

The use of direct communication from a coach not on the bench is also the brainchild of football, but the Sabres knew a good thing when they heard it. Bowman, who before leaving Montreal last summer had coached the

Canadiens to four consecutive Stanley Cups, instituted the three coach system, based on constant communication, immediately upon his arrival in Buffalo. Neilson became the man upstairs, Roberts the fellow next to him on the bench.

Many NHL teams deploy an assistant coach to watch from the press box and relay information to the team between periods, but the Sabres took it one step further.

Of course there were some bugs to be ironed out at first, like in the early-season game when Neilson spent two periods screaming, "Jimmy, can you hear me?"

"We all agreed the primary function of the head coach during a game is to change and match lines," Neilson says. "But Scotty felt another man was needed behind the bench to correct players' mistakes and give them more encouragement during the game. I can spot some of these mistakes or other things developing and I relay them to Jimmy, who passes them on to Scotty."

All this *Star Trek* stuff, judging from the Sabres' record under the new system, makes sense, doesn't it? ●